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ALBUM REVIEW

## **Classical review: Rachel Podger: Vivaldi; Les Siècles: Ravel**

The baroque violinist, backed by her international ensemble Brecon Baroque, has produced an entrancing and necessary album

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Geoff Brown

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## Rachel Podger

Vivaldi

★★★★★

## Les Siècles

Ravel

★★★★☆

Want to freshen up a familiar meal? If you're a restaurant chef the answer seems to be infiltrating the dish with chillies, whether they suit your tastebuds or not. Luckily that's not an available option with music. In any case, there are other and better ways to inject spice. With baroque repertoire, for instance, I like to reach for Rachel Podger, the unsurpassed British glory of the baroque violin. A good sprinkling of Podger, backed by her international ensemble Brecon Baroque, and even the dullest dog leaps back to life.

Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* is never dull, although it definitely suffers from overexposure. So why consider another recording? The answer lies in many things: Podger's bouncy phrasing and clarity, myriad subtleties in textures and dynamics, the kindness of a recording that, unlike some, allows the music and its reverberations to breathe.

I especially relished the interpretation's natural flow: no forced eccentricities, no extreme flights. There's also the exquisite balance of parts shared between Podger's eight-strong ensemble. Take the largo in *Winter*, where her warming solo line is delicately splattered by pizzicato raindrops from the accompanying strings: a lovely effect. Three other Vivaldi concertos, all welcome, but much less familiar, fill out this entrancing and necessary album.

MENU

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You're also guaranteed the spice of life if the music is played by François-Xavier Roth's period instrument ensemble Les Siècles, especially if the repertoire is indubitably French, from the early 20th century. Everybody wins, then, in the group's latest release devoted to Ravel, seamlessly gathered from various live concerts.

The music is mostly divine (the complete ballet *Ma mère l'Oye*, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*), with one youthful and fascinating novelty sprinkled between (the fairytale overture *Shéhérazade*). The instruments are another delight (particularly the winds, gorgeously warm with dusky tints), and help us listen with fresh ears to some of the most touching and companionable music ever written.

I wouldn't suggest listening to this album in one go: like chocolates, Ravel should be rationed. But even an overdose of Les Siècles' *Ravel* is much better than chillies with everything. *Channel Classics/Harmonia Mundi*

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